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Gompers, Samuel

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THE ATTITUDE OF  
THE AMERICAN FEDERATION  
OF LABOR  
TOWARD INDUSTRIAL EDUCATION

BY  
SAMUEL GOMPERS

PRESS OF CLARENCE S. NATHAN, INC.  
NEW YORK

## THE ATTITUDE OF THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR TOWARD INDUSTRIAL EDUCATION

By Samuel Gompers

An Address before the Eighth Annual Convention of the National  
Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education,  
Richmond, Va., December 10, 1914

**A**N argument, I take it, is not required of me in support of industrial education, nor any exposition of the purposes or ideals of industrial education. You know what industrial education is and what are its purposes and ideals. The question in your minds is perhaps with reference to myself as a representative of organized labor. Do I know what industrial education is, and what are its purposes and ideals? But since my personal knowledge is of very little consequence to anyone, except as a sort of reflex of the knowledge of the millions of workers, the question is, in fact, **does organized labor understand what industrial education is, and what are its purposes and ideals? Finally, if it does understand these purposes and ideals, does it approve of them?** And will it cooperate sincerely in the development of tried and proven rational schemes of industrial education?

(A great part of my life and energy has been devoted to combatting wrong-headed notions about the attitude of organized labor with reference to every sort of social and economic question. These questions have increased in number and in variety with the development of industrial civilization. The need for

efficient industrial education for our boys and girls is now more urgent than ever before. Nor is the need of educational training for greater efficiency confined to the factory or the shops; it is manifest in the home life, and in demands for instruction in domestic economy. The factory system and modern industrial organization have resulted in such high specialization that only what have been referred to to-night as the tag-ends of industry have been left to women in the homes, and in modern industrial establishments the subdivision of labor has gone on to such a degree that workers perform the same set task a thousand, or ten thousand, or a hundred thousand times a day. The same task is automatically repeated again and again without knowledge of its relation to the rest of the industry for the sole purpose of gaining speed. **I repeat that if ever industrial education was essential it is essential to-day.** We cannot turn back the wheels of industry, but we can make the knowledge and the effectiveness of the workers such that they will have some comprehension of the entire article produced and of every branch of the production.

In this work I have sometimes felt that the presumption is always against labor—that it is always assumed as a matter of course that labor is by a sort of “natural depravity” and strange blindness, opposed to everything, including everything that is for its own best interests. Sometimes it is assumed that this opposition is due to a pernicious temperament on the part of labor leaders, and sometimes that it is due to simple ignorance and incapacity to understand complex social conditions. The workers are essentially honest and sincere, and permit me to assure you, the degree of their ignorance is not so great as the presumptuous and supercilious often assume it to be.

You should know that **organized labor does not oppose the development of industrial education in the public schools.** Indeed, that would not at all fairly indicate the attitude of organized labor. I say to you that the organizations constituting the American Federation of Labor have been for years engaged in the work of systematically providing industrial education to their members. This instruction has been given thru the medium of the trade union journals and schools established and maintained by them. Organized labor, I repeat,

is not opposed to industrial education. It is eager to cooperate actively in instituting industrial education in our public schools. The workingman has too little time, and can therefore take but little interest in any other sort of education.

You will agree with me that there is absolutely no reason why labor, organized or unorganized, should oppose the sort of industrial education proposed here in Richmond, and I can assure you that labor does not oppose anything without good reason. When it has good reason to oppose so many things why should it oppose anything without reason?

#### NEED TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INTEREST

✓ Organized labor has opposed and will continue to oppose some enterprises which have been undertaken in the name of industrial education. It has opposed and will continue to oppose the exploitation of the laborer even when that exploitation is done under the name of industrial education. It may continue to regard with indifference, if not with suspicion, some private schemes of industrial education. With regard to such enterprises where they are instituted by employers, with a single eye to the profit of such employers, organized labor is from Missouri—it will have to be shown that the given enterprise is not a means of exploiting labor—a means of depressing wages by creating an over-supply of labor in certain narrow fields of employment.

✓ Organized labor cannot favor any scheme of industrial education which is lop-sided—any scheme, that is to say, which will bring trained men into any given trade without regard to the demand for labor in that trade. **Industrial education must maintain a fair and proper apportionment of the supply of labor power to the demand for labor power** in every line of work. Otherwise its advantages will be entirely neutralized. If, for example, the result of industrial education is to produce in any community a greater number of trained machinists than are needed in the community, those machinists which have been trained cannot derive any benefit from their training, since they will not be able to find employment except at economic disadvantages. Under these conditions industrial education is of no advantage to those who have received it, and

it is a distinct injury to the journeymen working at the trade who are subjected to a keen competition artificially produced. Industrial education must meet the needs of the worker as well as the requirements of the employer.

I can see that in some respects the most difficult task before industrial education is that of maintaining an equilibrium of supply and demand of efficient artisans, an equilibrium as nearly perfect as is physically possible. How shall this most difficult problem be solved? How shall such an equilibrium of labor supply and demand be maintained and industrial education entirely freed from any suspicion of working injury to labor by causing a maladjustment of supply to demand?

The answer to these questions seems obvious. There is in my opinion only one way in which to avoid this difficulty, only one way in which to avoid the danger of working serious injury to labor—working injury in spite of the very best intentions to benefit labor. **The only way to avoid working an injury to labor under the name of industrial education is to find out what is the demand for labor in a community.** In a word, it seems to me that the only safe basis for undertaking industrial education in any community is the basis which, as I understand, has been established here in Richmond. **Industrial education should be in every instance based upon a survey of the industries of the community—upon an accumulation of facts regarding the employments in the community.** Upon such a basis the public schools may properly proceed to provide for the particular industrial needs of the community, and with such an accumulation of data in hand there can be no excuse if industrial education does not prove to be of undoubted benefit to labor and to the community.

Industrial education comes close to the life and happiness of labor. It involves the means of livelihood for the workingman. The test of efficiency of industrial education is wage-earning power—not simply increase in efficiency of labor to produce. It is perfectly possible for industrial education, even when provided by the public schools, if it is not organized with regard to the industrial needs of the community, to increase the productivity and efficiency of certain groups of labor and at the same time reduce the wage-earning power of the laborers in those groups. There is nothing mysterious in this. It would

result from the working of a universal economic law. To the extent that industrial education is not precisely adapted to the needs of the community, it will tend to have exactly this result, namely, it will increase the productive efficiency of certain groups of labor and by bringing into those groups an oversupply of labor will tend to economic deterioration.

I do not anticipate that any such results are at all likely to follow as a consequence of industrial education in Richmond. Why? Because Richmond has, as a preliminary to the establishment of industrial courses of instruction in its public schools, made an exhaustive survey of its industries. Richmond knows, as a result of this survey of its industries, what sort of industrial training will be of value for its youth, and Richmond is going to give that sort of industrial education as a result. I believe that the working men of Richmond as a body, all of them, in every field of industrial employment, are going to be benefitted by industrial education. I believe that these benefits will be apparent as an immediate consequence of that education and that each year those benefits will increase. I believe thus because Richmond has started right, and it is fair to assume that having started right, she will continue in the right way. And I can assure the people of Richmond that they will have the full support in this work of organized labor in Richmond.

#### ATTITUDE OF ORGANIZED LABOR HAS BEEN MISCONSTRUED

Isn't it absurd to assume that there will develop among the workmen of Richmond any sort of opposition to this effort to make the instruction in our public schools democratic? Isn't it absurd to suppose that labor wants our public schools to go on in the future, doing as they have done in the past—teaching culture of a medieval type, a culture that has little bearing upon the life and welfare of the working people? Why should workmen oppose a modification of the curriculum of the public schools to make that curriculum serve more fully the needs of workmen? **I can assure you that no disposition will be found anywhere among workmen to oppose this effort to make our schools more democratic in serving the real bread-and-butter needs of the community.**

Let me tell you further that labor—organized labor—has been active for years to secure this end, **active in its efforts to make the public schools do precisely that which some misinformed people even think labor opposes.** In 1903 the American Federation of Labor at its annual convention appointed a committee on education. What sort of education do you think most interested the delegates to that convention? It was not that education which deals with the syntax of dead languages; it was not even that education which deals with the development of the fine arts, or with the systematic teaching of the sciences. These are all of them legitimate ends of education, and the American Federation of Labor approves of these educational ends, but the sort of education which the A. F. of L. was particularly interested in, and the sort of education which was under consideration when this committee on education was appointed in 1903, was industrial education. This was more than a decade ago, and during the entire period which has elapsed since the appointment of that committee the A. F. of L. has been active in fostering and furthering every legitimate enterprise for the industrial education of workers.)

✓ We have been working for industrial education for more than a decade. A committee appointed in 1903 was to consider what the trade unions themselves could do to make up for the deficiency of the public schools. The members of the trade unions felt the need of industrial education. This sort of education was not provided by the public schools. The trade unions whose members paid taxes to support the public schools were not getting from those schools the sort of education which they needed to enable them to become skilled, efficient, and better paid workmen. They were getting, in so far as they got anything at all, a sort of education which had for them very little value, and they therefore took under consideration the possibility of organizing a scheme of education which would be of value to them.

Now when the public schools come forward with a proposition to provide the sort of education needed by the workmen, do you think that they are going to oppose that undertaking? I do not think so. In fact, I know that they will welcome any such development.

#### OFFICIAL ACTION BY THE FEDERATION

In 1904 another committee on education was appointed, and again in 1905 another committee, and again in 1906. In 1907 the A. F. of L. at its annual convention resolved that "we do endorse any policy, or any society (this I may state included and had especial reference to the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education) or association, having for its object the raising the standard of industrial education and the teaching of the higher technic of our various industries."

The committee to which this resolution was referred, reported it "decided to record itself in favor of the best opportunities for the most complete industrial and technical education obtainable," and it recommended an investigation of industrial school systems.

In 1908 the committee on education tested "with satisfaction the splendid progress accomplished by the Executive Council along the lines of industrial education," and submitted to the convention a set of resolutions in which it stated that industrial education is "necessary and inevitable for the progress of an industrial people."

Industrial education was before the convention of 1909, at which time I myself stated in my report that the A. F. of L. favored public industrial education, and opposed only narrowly specialized training under the control of private interests. **Organized labor has always opposed and will continue to oppose sham industrial education,** whether at public or at private expense. It has opposed and will continue to oppose that superficial training which confers no substantial benefit upon the worker, which does not make him a craftsman, but only an interloper, who may be available in times of crisis, perhaps, as a strike breaker, but not as a trained artisan for industrial service at other times. Industrial education must train men for work not for private and sinister corporation purposes.

I do not refer to this for the purpose of introducing any note of discord into this meeting, but simply by way of explaining what it is that has at times in the past aroused labor's opposition to what has been unfairly called industrial education.

It will be found that wherever labor has opposed what has been put forth as industrial education, the enterprise called industrial education has been something entirely different from that which Richmond is instituting in its public schools to-day.

To the 1909 convention of the American Federation of Labor I took pleasure in submitting this: "That since technical education of the workers in trade and industry is a public necessity it should not be a private, but a public function, conducted by the public, and the expense involved at public cost." You people in Richmond are doing to-day precisely what the committee of the A. F. of L. recommended five years ago should be done.

In 1911 the A. F. of L. came forward in support of a bill in Congress providing for national aid in establishing vocational education in the public schools of the country. Since that date up to the present time the A. F. of L. has consistently, persistently and unremittingly advocated the establishment of industrial education in the public schools.

I challenge any one to produce evidence that organized labor has at any time, or in any instance, ever opposed, or failed to support the institution of industrial education in the public schools. Organized labor is not so stupid as to oppose its own advancement. What possible motive could it have in opposing education organized solely with reference to its own advancement? None whatever.

The sort of industrial education which Richmond is instituting is the one and the only sort of industrial education which can enlist the sincere cooperation of trade unionists and should receive the cooperation of employers as well. It is equally to the interest of the employers as of labor, that workmen shall be trained for real efficiency. The efficient worker produces more, and by virtue of his efficiency makes for a higher economic, industrial, commercial and social development. **I believe that the welfare of labor depends to a very large extent upon the development of industrial education,** and that in this case at least, the welfare of the employer, and of the community is equally involved with that of the workman. In the matter of industrial education there is absolutely no controversy between labor and the employers of labor—provided always that the industrial education is what it purports to be,

industrial education, organized by the public schools for the benefit of the youth of the community. Organized labor represents the fathers and mothers of these youths, and the fathers and mothers are not going to oppose the best interests of their own children.

Those who wish documentary proof that organized labor has for years been actively agitating for the institution of industrial education in the public schools, I shall be very glad to provide with such proofs. (They are spread through the annual reports of every convention held by the A. F. of L. beginning with that of 1903, and including that of 1914. In 1910 the Federation published a preliminary Report on Industrial Education, and in 1912 a full report of its Committee on Industrial Education, approved in conformity with a resolution of the convention held in Denver, 1908.)

#### EDUCATION AND INDUSTRIAL COMPETITION

Let us approach this question from an entirely different angle in order to bring out clearly labor's interest in the development of industrial education.

American industries are producing in competition with the industries established in other countries. In normal times, when these other countries are engaged not in warring upon one another with wonderfully ingenious and effective instruments of wholesale murder, they are none the less strenuously engaged in a warfare of industrial competition. I use the word "warfare" in this connection because no other term seems adequately to sum up the strains and rivalries of industrial competition between nations, but I would not wish you to assume that I think that there is any very close analogy between the conflicts of organized militant wholesale murder and the contests of industrial competition. Industrial rivalry is beneficent, not malign; it is a condition of social progress, not of rapine and destruction.

Industrial competition and rivalry is a condition of improving material welfare, and of advancing civilization. In a word, industrial competition is a warfare of progress, and in this warfare no nation can maintain its industrial supremacy, nor can any nation insure the progressive improvement in the



material welfare of its people, which does not adopt the most modern methods and the most effective devices of the industrial world struggle.)

It is well known to you, who are all of you informed regarding the development of industrial education, that this sort of education has been adopted very generally by those great nations with which the people of the United States—the workingman as well as the employer of labor—must compete. Industrial education of the workers, even extending to workers in the unskilled employments, has been, for example, Germany's chief method of industrial conquest. With this means Germany has entered not only foreign markets, but even our own domestic market in many lines. What does that trade mark with which we have all become so familiar in recent years "Made in Germany" mean? It means simply industrial education of the workers of Germany. Largely by virtue of that sort of education, Germany has been enabled to produce commodities and to place them in our own markets, and in many cases has been enabled to displace the American product.

This successful competition of Germany does not mean that Germany has depended upon cheap labor to enable her to produce cheaply. We can compete with cheap labor in any line, because cheap labor is in fact, and in the last analysis not cheap labor at all. On the contrary, it is the most expensive and the least profitable sort of labor. **No community which depends upon cheap labor in the sense of underpaid labor can win out in international competition against a nation which depends upon intelligent thoroly trained labor.** Thoroly trained labor produces cheaply not because it is underpaid, but because it is efficient. And thoroly trained efficient labor can demand high wages because of its intelligence, efficiency and organization.)

Is it not clearly to the interest of the workingmen of the United States that they shall be put upon the same level of competition as that occupied by workingmen in foreign countries with whom they must compete? Are not the workingmen vitally interested in maintaining American industries in competition with foreign industries? If these industries decline it is the American workingman who is thrown into the ranks of the unemployed—the American artisan who is depressed into

the ranks of the unskilled. In this process the standard of skilled labor is degraded, and unskilled labor is subjected to a new sort of competition which inevitably weakens its condition. The process of industrial progress is reversed. Instead of making the skilled workman more skilled and at the same time lifting the unskilled worker into the ranks of the skilled, the skilled worker is forced down into the congested mass of unskilled labor.

Perhaps, however, even this deterioration of labor is not the chief consideration. No civilized nation can maintain its self-respect on any other basis than that of competing in industrial rivalry on the basis, not of ignorance, but of intelligence, on the basis not of cheap labor, but of efficient, well trained labor, on the basis not of brute physical manual labor, but of skill and proficiency.

We do not wish to compete with Europe as the Chinese compete with the whole world. We could not do that and retain our self-respect. We could not do that without adopting Chinese methods of work, which would mean a minimum of rest and food, no recreation, and a maximum of hours of labor. If we are not willing to adopt Chinese methods, we must adopt weapons of industrial progress which has enabled European nations to advance in material welfare in competition, not only with the Orient, but more especially in competition with the United States, and with other countries which have had available as a basis of industrial development vast natural resources. **The period is almost past when the United States can depend upon cheap raw materials obtained with comparatively little labor from its mines and virgin fields. It is entering upon a period when it must depend upon the qualities of human labor. Under these conditions industrial decline is the only alternative to industrial education.** Do you think that organized labor is going to advocate a policy of industrial decline—a policy of competing on a basis of cheap labor, instead of trained and efficient labor? Do you think it is going to advocate the adoption of Chinese methods in its competition with Europe? I can assure you that the American workingman will not accept any such solution of the problem. He will insist that competition shall be upon the basis not of cheap brute labor, but of intelligent efficient skilled labor, which means that he

will in the future, as he has done in the past, insist that the instruction in our public schools be made democratic; in a word, that the public schools generally shall institute industrial education, and that that education shall be based upon an exhaustive study of the industries to determine what sort of industrial training is required and is most conducive to the physical, mental, material, and social welfare of the workers, the community, and that which holds out the best hope for America's workers, her citizenship, the perpetuity of our republic, and fulfilment of its mission as the leader in the humanitarianism of the world.



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